



QAA

Information on workload

A student guide



Introduction

There are lots of different places you can get information about higher education.

Universities and colleges have their own websites, publish prospectuses and run open days, all of which are designed to tell you about them and what they offer. There are also a number of independent sources of information like comparison websites such as www.unistats.com and <http://university.which.co.uk> as well as the information provided by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) on its website. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) has also released an animation which you might like to watch that tries to explain things a bit more (www.youtube.com/qaatube: 'How to choose where to study higher education').

All of this information is intended to help you make a confident decision about what and where to study. One thing that will probably be important to you is what it is actually like to study at the university or college you are thinking of going to. In particular you might want to know about issues like how much time you will be expected to commit to your studies, how you will be taught and who will teach you, how many people will be in your class, and how you can make your views known when you get there. This series of four short guides helps you answer those questions by explaining some of the key pieces of information you could look for, grouped into four themes:

- Information on staff teaching qualifications
- Information on class size
- **Information on workload (this guide)**
- Information on how you can comment on your course.

Information on how courses differ

You should expect the university or college you are thinking of attending to provide you with clear information, in a place you can easily find it, about what you will have to do to complete your course and what kind of experience you can expect when studying with them. They should also tell you why they have decided that this approach is the right one for them.

It is worth remembering that universities and colleges will take different approaches according to what they are teaching and their own particular academic environment. This will lead to differences between them in terms of the amount of direct teaching you will receive and how things are organised on your course.



The amount of support you can expect

The university or college should make clear the type and amount of support available to you. They should explain who will be giving the support (for example, lecturers, tutors and specialist support staff), how much time these staff will have specifically set aside for helping students, and how they are qualified for the role they undertake. They should also tell you about any services that you can just drop in and use, and about any online support systems.

When looking at information published by universities or colleges about how much support to expect, it is worth bearing in mind that in higher education, students should be seen as partners in learning. This means that you share responsibility for your education with the university or college you are attending. While you should expect support and a well organised course, a key aspect of this partnership is you taking control of your own learning and developing your ability to learn and study independently.

The ways you will be taught and assessed

There are lots of different ways that universities or colleges teach and assess students. This is because they need to be able to respond to different students' needs, take account of new technology and teaching methods, and do things in the way that is right for the subject being taught.

Regardless of what approach is taken, a course should be designed so that you have the opportunity to develop the skills and knowledge intended, and are then able to demonstrate your achievement against criteria that you are told about in advance. Whether you succeed or not will of course be down to many different factors, including what you know and can do already, how motivated you are to study and how prepared you are to ask for help.

A key feature of any course will be communication from the university or college about how you are getting on (often called 'feedback'). Along with letting you know how well you have done in a particular assessment, feedback is also likely to be given all the way through your course, even when there is no assessment. This is known as 'formative feedback' and should be helpful and constructive, providing specific information about how your work could be improved. It should also be given to you in good time so that you can act on the suggestions.

The following are some of the most common teaching and assessment methods used in higher education.

Teaching methods:

- **Lecture** - a presentation or talk on a particular topic
- **Seminar** - a discussion or classroom session that focuses on a particular topic or project
- **Webinar** - a virtual lecture or seminar
- **Tutorial** - a one-to-one or small group discussion
- **Project supervision** - a meeting with a supervisor to discuss a piece of work
- **Demonstration** - a session in which a practical skill or technique is demonstrated
- **Practical class or workshop** - a practical session learning a particular skill or technique
- **Supervised time in studio/workshop** - time to work on your own in a studio or workshop but with supervision
- **Fieldwork** - practical work outside of the university or college
- **External visit** - a visit to a location in order to experience a particular environment
- **Work-based and placement learning** - learning that takes place in the workplace

Assessment methods:

- **Written examination** - a question or set of questions relating to a particular area
- **Written assignment (including essays)** - an exercise completed in writing in your own time
- **Report** - a description of an experience or activity
- **Dissertation** - a longer piece of written work
- **Portfolio** - a compilation of coursework
- **Project outputs** - the products of project work, often of a practical nature
- **Oral assessment/presentation** - a conversation or spoken presentation on a topic
- **Practical skills assessment** - usually by observation
- **Set exercises** - questions or tasks designed to test your ability to apply knowledge or skills

How much contact with teaching staff you can expect

You should expect universities and colleges to provide clear information, in a place where you can easily find it, about the amount of contact you will have with staff and how much teaching and tutorial time you can expect during your course. This should include a description of the different teaching methods they will use, what you are expected to do on your own and how much time you should spend studying in total.

Explaining contact hours

A phrase that often gets used to describe the amount of time you are in direct contact with members of academic staff is 'contact hours'. When looking at information about contact hours it is worth bearing in mind that contact time can be in many different forms - not just face-to-face. For example, it might include email discussion groups, webinars, email, telephone calls, video conferencing and other online discussion forums.

To help you understand contact hours, a university or college should provide information about the following things:

- the form that contact takes, including teaching group size
- the intended purpose of the contact time
- whom the contact will be with
- whether or not the contact time is formally scheduled
- the range of activity types provided, in addition to teaching.

How much time a course takes in total

Direct contact with staff members is only one aspect of learning in higher education. There are many other ways in which you can and will learn that may not involve direct contact with staff and that cannot always easily be counted. Work placements, discussions with other students, work you do on your own and time spent practising and learning skills are all good examples of this.

Because there is so much variety in the way that universities and colleges organise courses, and in the different amounts of time it takes students to learn things, it is difficult to put a specific figure on how many hours a particular course takes. However, you might see information about something called 'notional learning time'. This is an estimate of the total number of hours you can be expected to spend reaching a particular level or target.

Notional learning time relates closely to the idea of 'academic credit' - a numerical measure used by universities and colleges to recognise learning at a specific level. Notional learning time is expressed as 10 hours per credit. An honours degree valued at 360 credits is estimated to require 3,600 notional hours of learning.

Notional learning time is an internationally recognised system developed by experts in higher education and is used across the UK and other countries such as Ireland, South Africa and New Zealand. Your experience might of course vary, and some students might take more or less time to complete their degree.

Which course would be best for you?

Because every student is different, and universities and colleges organise things in different ways, there is no simple answer to this question. Below are some of the questions that you might want to ask to help you work it out.

- Will the course meet my specific needs?
- Will I get enough good quality feedback on the work I do when I am there?
- Will it be clear to me what is expected of me and what I will have to do in assessments?

- Will I have access to the spaces and resources I need (such as libraries, laboratories and studios)?
- Will the technology available be good enough for what I need?
- Will the university or college listen to my feedback on them and try and make things better as a result?

There are also places you can go to find out information about what other people have thought about the university or college, and how other people have done while they are there. Two key places you can look for information are the Unistats website and the Quality Assurance Agency's website.

- The Unistats website **www.unistats.com** contains a huge amount of information that should be able to help you - including the results of the National Student Survey, which looks at how satisfied students are with different courses at universities and colleges right across the UK.
- QAA reviews universities and colleges to check on standards and quality, and publishes its findings here: **www.qaa.ac.uk/institutionreports**.

Further information

If you have any questions about staff teaching qualifications then the best thing to do is to get in touch with the university or college using the contact details on their website or in their prospectus.

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